

P 251044Z SEP 07  
FM AMEMBASSY RANGOON  
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6556  
INFO ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE  
UN SECURITY COUNCIL COLLECTIVE  
AMEMBASSY CANBERRA  
AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI  
AMEMBASSY SEOUL  
AMEMBASSY TOKYO  
CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI  
USMISSION GENEVA  
NSC WASHDC  
USMISSION USUN NEW YORK  
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JOINT STAFF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L RANGOON 000910

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP AND IO; PACOM FOR FPA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/20/2017

TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM BM

SUBJECT: BURMA: PROTESTS GATHER MOMENTUM

REF: RANGOON 906 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Pol Officer Sean O'Neill for Reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. On September 24, Embassy officers observed several demonstrations in Rangoon, the largest of which numbered well into the thousands and consisted of both monks and civilians. In a significant change, the demonstrations have taken on an overt political tone in the past few days with many of today's participants carrying political banners and chanting political slogans. Our sources report some schools and banks closed early today as a precaution although we have received no reports of violence or arrests. There were no uniformed security forces present at the processions but police have reinforced security at barricades near Aung San Suu Kyi's house. We have been unable to confirm whether any demonstrations took place outside Rangoon due to exceptionally poor telephone connectivity within the country in the past few days. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) On September 24, Embassy officers observed several thousand monks and civilians stage several processions throughout Rangoon. At its peak, the largest march consisted of approximately 10,000 participants and was observed, and at times cheered, by tens of thousands of spectators during its roughly three-hour procession. In addition to monks from several local monasteries, we saw a large number of laypersons participating in today's procession, many of whom marched in large groups distinct from the monks. For the first time since these monk-led demonstrations began, we heard many participants recite political slogans in addition to traditional Buddhist chants. At one point in the march, Poloff observed monks and laypersons holding banners calling for "national reconciliation" and the release of all political prisoners.

¶3. (SBU) The regime and its supporters continue to keep a relatively low profile. We did not receive any reports of violence or arrests associated with today's protests. Neither did we observe or receive any reports of uniformed security following or interfering with any of today's processions. However, in one notable exception, we have seen a significant number of armed police in riot gear behind the barricades on either side of Aung San Suu Kyi's block since Sunday. (Note: On Saturday, several hundred monks and a handful of civilians were permitted to pass the barricades and march in front of Aung San Suu Kyi's house where she briefly emerged from her front gate to greet them. Due to the lack of electronic communications during our Embassy move we reported this via telephone through the Operations Center.

End note.)

¶4. (SBU) Rangoon is abuzz with talk of these demonstrations. Our contacts tell us people are excited by the protests but nervous about how the government may react to them. Despite the absence of violence, some banks closed early as a precaution and our FSNS report many parents kept children home from school today. Rumors hospital beds are being cleared for mass casualties have spread through Rangoon in recent days. Others speculate the regime will declare martial law. While we have seen nothing to substantiate these theories, their persistence demonstrates the public is talking about these events and is concerned about what could happen. In contrast, the regime-run New Light of Myanmar has mentioned nothing of the past few days' protests, choosing instead to run a banner headline about traffic enforcement in the new capital of Nay Pyi Taw.

¶5. (C) Comment and Recommendation: The protests are gathering momentum rather than losing steam, which causes many cautious Burmese to speculate that the military will have to resort to violence to stop them. We do not want that to happen. Perhaps we can help by mobilizing greater press attention in the neighboring countries about what is really going on here. At the governmental level, we can count on little more than mild criticism of the Burmese government. Perhaps they might react more strongly if they get more pressure from their own people to do something. While not all the neighbors have much of an active press or democratically-inclined opinion makers, many do, including

Thailand, Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Japan, Korea, and India. We would be willing to put together a fact sheet for posts to use in a focused public diplomacy campaign, and would welcome suggestions from other posts on what sort of items might have particular resonance in the host country so they could tailor them appropriately. For instance, many older Singaporeans and Malaysians remember the University of Rangoon as the best university in South East Asia. Now Burmese university graduates do not even have the knowledge of the average secondary graduate in those countries. Burma is famous in the region for its rich resources, but most probably do not know how little the military spends on health and education, instead using increasing oil and gas revenues to build a new capital out in the middle of nowhere. The Burmese demonstrators are literally risking their lives to call for change. The neighbors should support those brave souls. End Comment and Recommendation.

VILLAROSA